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AUTHOR Shuter, Robert
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which an environment based on interpersonal sensitivity, individual freedom, and abolition of sex roles influenced patterns of interaction in a small group. Two hypotheses were developed: (1) free schools maintain a definite normative and value system that influences group process among small groups of its members; and (2) the influence of the immediate free school environment on group behavior should result in member deviation from conventional sex role interaction styles. The researcher observed and participated in a free school located on farm land which housed 11 of the 21 children attending the school. Four types of groups were identified: commuter, resident, resident/commuter, and teacher. Results indicated that the behavior of the first three groups was not influenced by the norms and values of the school; that sex role interaction styles and behavioral preferences of commuters remained unchanged; and that teachers' commitment to counter-culture resulted in interaction styles that deviated from those associated with traditional sex roles. This indicated that patterns of interaction associated with conventional sex roles could be modified if individuals were psychological members of a subculture committed to male/female liberation. (HOD)

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THE FREE SCHOOL: A FIELD STUDY ON SEX ROLES AND SMALL GROUP INTERACTION

by

Dr. Robert Shuter

Marquette University

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Small group researchers have investigated the influence that social context can exert on group behavior. Research has been conducted on the effect of the larger society[1] and its subsystems (i.e. subculture and social class) on group process.[2] Investigators have also examined the impact of immediate organizational environments on small group patterns of interaction.[3] Though much environmental small group research has been conducted, no studies have been reported in the literature concerning the influence of an alternative social context on a group member's sex role interaction style.

An alternative organizational environment has a normative and value system which deviates significantly from that of the larger society.[4] For instance, proponents of the counter-culture movement argue that since the larger society affirms competition, sexism, racism, behavioral standardization, and interpersonal insensitivity, they must develop institutional environments that sanction individual autonomy, noncompetitiveness, positive affirmation of individual differences, abolition of sex roles, and empathetic interaction.[5] This study explores the normative and value system of a counter-culture free school and its influence on the sex role interaction style of individuals participating in small free school groups.[6]

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

The study is concerned with the extent to which an environment based on interpersonal sensitivity and understanding, individual

freedom, and abolition of sex roles influences patterns of interaction in a small group. The research project is based on the assumption that social context affects individual and small group behavior. George Homans asserts that the small group is a "social system reacting with its environment as a self-adjusting organization of responses whose parts are mutually interdependent."[7] The group, according to Homans, is not only controlled by the internal structure -- its "mutually interdependent parts" -- but is constrained by external forces. The social context of which the group is a part sustains and regulates the external forces. Homans concludes that groups adapt to their external systems.[8]

In his theory of life space, Kurt Lewin also established that external systems influence internal group development. Lewin defined life space as the total psychological environment the person or group experiences subjectively.[9] According to Lewin, in order to predict the behavior of a group, the researcher must take into account its internal social structure and the environment in which it thrives. Lewin's field theory posits an inextricable relationship between the group and its environment, the integral components of what he calls the life space of the group. Life space, then, is a theoretical construct that involves the interdependence of the group and its contemporaneous social field. In other words, the life space of a group of free school students consists of the group's internal structure and its relationship to the existing norms and values of the school. The development of the small free school group is based on the group's adaption to the normative and value system of the educational institution.

Both Homans and Lewin established a theoretical relationship between a group and its environment. Muzafer Sherif, however, demonstrated that a social context can have substantial impact on an individual's behavior when he is highly attracted to it.[10] If a need-fulfilling environment can influence an individual, then it can certainly affect groups of individuals that meet within the same environmental boundaries. Sherif supported this theory when he wrote:

> Groups do not function in thin air, but in very definite settings of space, physical facilities, instrumentalities, and other groups and institutions. So adequate study of group properties and processes, and therefore member behavior, necessarily involves study of their settings as well.[11]

This study examines the effect of a need-fulfilling and attractive alternative organizational environment on the internal structure of small groups.[12]

Hypotheses Development and Variable Selection

Before investigating the influence of the free school environment on small group behavior, one variable was selected to be observed and hypotheses were developed. The selection of the variable and development of the hypotheses were determined after conducting an extensive review of free school and small group literature. Two hypotheses were developed for this study:

1. Free schools maintain a definite normative and value system that influences group process among small groups of free school members.
2. The influence of the immediate free school environment on group behavior should result in member deviation from conventional sex role interaction styles.

The first hypothesis is based on free school literature[13] and the philosophical statement of Gemini School, the free school observed for this study.[14] Counter-culture free schools are characterized by their humanistic environments.[15] The proponents of these alternative institutions suggest that they should be a place where students and teachers can be "understanding, trustful, compassionate, accepting, nonjudging, and open."[16] In addition, free school members are encouraged to deviate from traditional sex roles and experiment with new interaction styles.[17]

Gemini School also maintained a counter-culture free school climate. The founders of this institution wanted "children to free themselves from their sex roles as well as direct their own learning as they need to explore and understand their environment."[18] The school created the rhetorical impression that it was trying to provide an environment "free from destructive competition and fear of censure, in which a child can find his own way to grow."[19] Self discipline, individual worth, spontaneity, and authenticity were of paramount concern. Since small groups are inextricably bound to and influenced by their immediate environment, it was predicted that the norms and values of Gemini School would affect group behavior of free school members.

The second hypothesis concerns the relationship between the sex of individual group members and their patterns of interaction. Lewis Terman and Samuel Miles found that men are more aggressive and assertive than women.[20] Researchers have also

discovered that males are likely to demonstrate both linguistically and behaviorally that they are fearless, tough, and unemotional, while women usually think of themselves as sympathetic and compassionate.[21] These personality characteristics are reflected in the behavior of men and women in small groups.

Men tend to have a more assertive and aggressive interaction style then women when they participate in a group discussion.[22] In heterogenous groups, males frequently initiate interaction and control group activities, and females often assume subordinate group roles.[23] Moreover, men are frequently more influential in a group than women because they tend to dominate the interaction process.[24]

Many researchers suggest that the aggressive-assertive orientation of males and the submissive-yielding interaction style of females are products of cultural conditioning.[25] They argue that since society instructs young men to be competitive and aggressive and also demands that women appear docile and nonassertive, it is not surprising they have radically different interaction styles.

Males and females should manifest more behavioral variation in an organizational environment that repudiates traditional sex roles and affirms the ethic of equality and individuality. Since counter-culture free schools provide their members with a climate that is supposedly nonsexist and equalitarian, men and women are more likely to choose their interaction style rather than feel compelled to display culturally appropriate behavior. Men can assume a submissive interaction style and women can be aggressive communicators, without fear of social censure. Hence, men and

women should deviate from traditional sex role interaction styles in small free school groups.

Methodology and Procedure

The methodology used to conduct this study was participant observation.[26] It is based on the assumption that useful research conclusions about small groups can be derived from observing them in their natural habitat. However, only five percent of the small group studies have been conducted in the field and even fewer have been researched by a participant observer.[27]

One of the major difficulties encountered in this study was selecting a research site that had a learning climate and organizational philosophy congruent with the theoretical description of counter-culture free schools. To resolve this problem, a screening procedure was conducted in two stages. First, a list of free school attributes was developed from the literature of the movement.[28] It was used to determine the extent to which an alternative educational structure had a free school environment.

The second stage was devoted to contacting and visiting the alternative institutions that were considered counter-culture free schools.[29] The researcher informally interviewed free school students, teachers, and parents during each visit to determine if there was significant congruence between the list of theoretical free school attributes and the immediate environment of the educational structure. The philosophical statement of each school was also examined, and the inhabitants were briefly observed in dyadic and small group encounters. Eleven alternative in-

stitutions were screened before locating the free school used in this study.

Research Site

Gemini School was started in 1970 by a group of students, parents, and teachers who were dissatisfied with public and private schools in a section of Illinois. It was first housed in a Unitarian Church building; however, after a year at this site, the founders of the institution established a residential free school and "community collective." They purchased eight acres of farm land and a large building that could house a free school and also provide living quarters for members of the collective and students who resided at the educational institution. The collective consisted of individuals who left what they considered the inhumane conditions of the larger society to develop a small community founded on love and freedom.

There were twenty one children attending the school, eleven girls and ten boys. Nineteen students were between the ages of nine and twelve years old, one was fifteen, and another was four. Eleven children lived in the farm house, and the remainder of the student body resided in the town in which the school was located or the surrounding areas. Four teachers, who were also members of Gemini Collective, were usually in the farm house during school hours.

Research Strategies

A participant observer can either disclose his research

intentions to his subjects or conceal his identity. "Role pretense"[30] was employed in this study because many free school proponents were threatened by strangers who represented the "straight culture" and frequently did not permit them to observe the school's daily activities.[31] Moreover, since the presence of a researcher would have contaminated the social situation, a guise was created to minimize the disturbance of natural patterns of interaction.[32] The investigator, then, posed as a teacher's aid in order to gain permanent entree into Gemini School.

The researcher observed small group interaction as a member of the group or as a bystander, within close proximity of the face engagement. Observations were either recorded publicly, in the presence of free school teachers and students, or in private. Empirical findings made in situations not conducive for note taking were recorded during periodic trips to the rest room and other secluded areas of the farm house. A tape recorder was stored in the researcher's car and used during and after school to expedite the transcribing of information.

Informal interviewing and observation were employed over a four month period for approximately twenty hours a week or four complete school days. This commitment was necessary to investigate the reoccurrence of patterns of interaction and establish rapport with the free school population.

Field Study Results

There were four types of free school groups identified during this study. One type consisted of learners who commuted to the school (commuter groups), while another was composed of students

residing in the collective (resident groups). The third type was a combination of resident and commuter students (resident/commuter groups), and the final one consisted of free school teachers (teacher group). This section examines the four types of groups in terms of the members' sex role interaction styles.

Commuter Groups

Commuter groups consisted of learners who lived in the town in which Gemini School was located or the surrounding areas and attended the institution from nine-thirty in the morning until two-thirty. Though commuter and resident learners frequently worked and played with one another, there were many occasions when a group composed of only commuter students engaged in a specific activity. It was also apparent that residents often joined groups that consisted primarily of students who lived in the collective. Consequently, commuter groups developed either in response to the clannish behavior of many resident learners or because students who traveled to the school enjoyed interacting with one another.

A female was rarely chosen to lead a commuter group consisting of both boys and girls. Apparently, their submissive interaction style was more suitable for nonassertive group roles. The girls served as "group tellers" (i.e. recording secretaries), food arrangers, and distributors of paper, pencils, and other equipment needed by the group. They also assisted the males who worked on the important group tasks and did not compete with them for the more influential positions.

The girls also seemed less aggressive and assertive than the

boys. This was demonstrated whenever a commuter group consisting of males and females attempted to reach a decision. The boys usually dominated the interaction before the group voted on a proposal, while the females sat quietly and listened. The girls who managed to interact in the discussion were frequently ignored by the other members or verbally dominated by the boys.

The females rarely refused to accept a group decision, usually conformed to group norms, and did not directly challenge the leader's authority. Disagreement with a decision was frequently demonstrated nonverbally with a sigh, shrug, or sullen demeanor. Only the males manifested their disdain for a particular proposal in an overt and aggressive manner.

Commuter students engaged in culturally appropriate activities whenever they met with individuals of the same sex. War, flying paper planes, king of the mountain, and games that involved risk and possible danger were the boys' favorite group events. The girls, however, seldom participated in an activity that required strenuous physical exertion. Instead, they were interested in sewing, simulating domestic situations, and participating in discussions about their romantic involvements with male members of the free school.

Evidently, male and female members of commuter groups conformed to culturally defined sex role expectations. The boys never played house, sewed, or exchanged information about their emotional relationships, and the girls rarely dominated discussions, deviated from norms, or assumed positions of authority in groups composed of both sexes. Commuter groups, then, were not signifi-

cantly influenced by the norms and values of Gemini School since there was not a noticeable change in either the sex role interaction styles of the members or their behavioral preferences.

Resident Groups

The empirical data indicated that male learners were more aggressive and competitive, tended to interact more frequently in a group, and were more assertive than the girls. In addition, the females usually complied with group norms and permitted the males to dominate the decision-making process. The preceding observations described the interaction styles of individuals who were members of resident groups composed of both males and females. There were observable changes in the interpersonal behavior of some females when they interacted with a group of girls who resided at Gemini School. To illustrate this finding, a case study is provided below.

Two Students in Pursuit of Liberation

Though most female resident students engaged in activities consistent with their sex role, two girls participated in events which the larger society had traditionally reserved for males. They enjoyed activities that demanded agility such as climbing a tree or swinging on the rope that hung from one of the rafters in the barn. The girls also played baseball and several athletic games, and were aggressive and competitive when they participated in these events.

Because they used an inordinate amount of gestures, and spoke

louder and more rapidly than most female resident students, they appeared to have a very animated interaction style. These two girls also tended to deviate from group norms and did not submit to group pressure as willingly as most female residents. Consequently, when they interacted with a group of girls residing at the free school, they were usually more assertive than the other members.

These girls, however, assumed a submissive interaction style and seldom violated norms when they participated in a resident group that consisted of males. In fact, they permitted the boys to dominate group decision-making and rarely attempted to exert their influence. The most interesting change in their behavior occurred when the two girls decided to participate in a female task such as sewing rather than engage in a physical activity with the boys.

Evidently, the two students described in the case study deviated from culturally prescribed standards of female behavior only when they interacted with one another or a group of girls residing at the institution. The remaining female resident learners conformed to traditional sex role expectations since they were more submissive and less aggressive than their male counterparts.

The immediate free school environment, then, did not significantly influence the interaction styles of resident and commuter students. The hypotheses described earlier were incorrect in so far as these types of groups were concerned.

Resident/Commuter Groups

Since the organizational environment of Gemini School did not affect the behavior of resident and commuter students, it was not surprising that the members of resident/commuter groups had conventional sex role interaction styles. The girls were docile and nonassertive, and the boys were domineering, aggressive, and competitive. Furthermore, when male students were introduced into a group of females, the girls seldom engaged in deviant behavior and permitted the boys to manage and control the decision-making process.

It was also noted that the two female resident students described in the previous case study had a submissive interaction style even when they participated in a resident/commuter group composed of only girls. A case study is provided to amplify the finding.

Several female resident learners frequently ate lunch together during the school day. On this particular occasion, one of the "liberated" girls was participating in an informal luncheon discussion with two females who resided at the school. They reminisced about their public school experiences, at times, laughing uncontrollably at the idiosyncratic behavior of both teachers and administrators.

Since the liberated student enjoyed being the focus of attention, she cajoled the group to discuss her recollections of public school. If the girls were preoccupied with the experiences of another student, she frequently intervened and monopolized the subsequent interaction. It was evident, then, that this student dominated

group discussion and was louder and more assertive than the other members.

When two female commuter students joined them for lunch, there was a drastic change in this individual's behavior. She did not attempt to control the conversation but permitted members to freely disclose their opinions. Not only was she considerably more quiet, but there was a significant decline in her participation in the discussion. In fact, her assertive, loud interaction style was replaced by a mild, almost submissive demeanor. For the first time in the discussion, she responded behaviorally to conventional sex role expectations.

Apparently, she modified her interaction style because she considered commuter students members of the "straight culture" and feared social censure if she deviated from traditional patterns of interaction. This finding was based on interviews during which she described commuters as "outsiders," "straights," and "dupers." While complaining about frequently feeling nervous when the commuters arrived each day, she said that these students and especially their parents "looked them (resident learners) over as if they were freaks or something."

Since the two girls refused to engage in assertive or aggressive behavior in the presence of males or commuter students, it was clear even the most liberated students at Gemini School were not greatly influenced by the norms and values of the institution. However, unlike resident, commuter, and resident/commuter groups, the normative and value system of the teacher group successfully neutralized male and female sex roles.

The Teacher Group

The interaction style of male and female teachers deviated significantly from the behavioral expectations associated with conventional sex roles. For instance, the women were not less assertive and aggressive than the men. They did not accept a leader because he happened to be a man nor did they permit the males to dominate the decision-making process. Instead, they demanded and received leadership authority and had significant influence in the group.

One of the more interesting behavioral attributes of the men was their reticence to appear overly aggressive or assertive; in fact, the females frequently assumed a more forceful interaction style than the males. Apparently, the men were aware of their potential to dominate group interaction and attempted to regulate their behavior, especially in the presence of women. The females, however, did not restrain themselves from being overly aggressive. Consequently, the women seemed to have more behavioral latitude than the men since they could be as assertive as they wanted, while the males had to refrain from dominating group interaction.

The female teachers also deviated from group norms which they thought were unreasonable. Since the women did not permit the dominant culture to dictate their level of conformity, they only complied with norms that they considered equitable. The females, then, deviated from group standards as readily as the males.

The teachers' repudiation of conventional sex roles was also reflected in the type of activities in which they engaged. The male instructors often helped students sew, cook, or plant flowers,

and the females conducted sessions in woodcraft and even automobile mechanics. The teachers' participation in these activities was motivated in part by their desire to imbue students with the philosophy of male/female liberation. Evidently, they hoped their behavior would induce free school learners to deviate from traditional sex roles.

The teachers were so committed to abolishing cenventional sex roles that they often repressed hostile feelings that were aroused when students engaged in sexist behavior. John, a teacher at Gemini School, talked at length about a female commuter student who enjoyed using cosmetics whenever she had the opportunity. She frequently brought her mother's lipstick and mascara to school and showed the other females how to use them. In fact, she often initiated "dress-up" sessions during which female students dressed in skirts and other conventional apparel, wore an excessive amount of cosmetics, and usually discussed their romantic involvements with the boys.

Since John believed this student was "imposing her sexist trip on the other girls," his first inclination was to tell her to "wipe the paint off her face and put on a pair of jeans." He also thought of informing her parents that she was internalizing their "sexist attitudes." John, however, did not express his hostile feelings to the student or her parents; instead, he hoped she would be enlightened by the liberated inhabitants of Gemini School. Although he privately condemned her behavior, he attempted to treat her with respect and sensitivity.

Though the teachers deviated significantly from conventional

sex roles, one cannot conclude that their group was greatly influenced by the normative and value system of Gemini School. Since resident students conformed to conventional sex role expectations even though they had resided at the institution as long as the teachers, there were apparently other factors responsible for the variation in individual and group response to the immediate free school environment. The intervening factors are examined in the final section of the study.

Discussion

The results indicated that the behavior of resident, commuter, and resident/commuter groups was not influenced by the norms and values of Gemini School. Apparently, the sex role interaction styles and behavioral preferences of commuter students remained unchanged because they did not live in Gemini Collective. These learners were members of groups and institutions that maintained normative systems antithetical to the values of the free school. The limited time that commuter students spent in an alternative organizational environment and their membership in peer groups, families, and other institutions that did not encourage deviation from traditional sex roles may have prevented them from responding to the immediate environment of Gemini School.

It was also evident that resident learners were exposed to the normative system of the larger society even though they lived in the collective. Their previous membership in public schools and other conventional institutions may have militated against the

internalization of free school values. In addition, the relatively short period of time that resident students lived at Gemini School may not have been sufficient to modify interaction patterns developed over years of conditioning in the larger society. The dominant environment (larger society), then, seemed to have more influence on the behavior of resident, commuter, and resident/commuter groups than the immediate social context (free school).[33]

The teachers demonstrated, however, that an intimate and lasting association with counter-culture may produce a significant change in individual and group behavior. The instructors' commitment to counter-culture was revealed throughout their lives since they had all been members of other collectives and free schools that repudiated many of the norms and values of the dominant culture. They also shared an abiding concern about racism and sexism in the United States and were members of organizations that attempted to resolve these social problems. The teachers' ideological attachment to the precepts of counter-culture resulted in interaction styles that deviated considerably from those associated with traditional sex roles.

The study indicated that patterns of interaction associated with conventional sex roles can be modified if individuals are psychological members of a subculture committed to male/female liberation. It also suggested that an alternative organizational environment will have little affect on small group behavior unless members free themselves from the normative and value system of the larger society. If the dominant culture can influence individual and group behavior as significantly as this study has indicated,

alternative communities, families, schools, and religious institutions may find it very difficult to instill humanistic values in their members.

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7. The Human Group (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1950) p. 3.

8. Ibid., p. 446.

9. Field Theory in Social Science (New York: Harper, 1951) p. xi. Also see pp. 173-200 for Lewin's analysis of environmental influence on group behavior.

10. Reference Groups (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 247.

11. Ibid., p. 54.

12. George Dennison argues that to the free school student "There was nothing as attractive and supportive as his own school." See The Lives of Children (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 27. This researcher's earlier study in a free school confirmed Dennison's position since it was found that students maintained a reference relationship with the institution. See "The Free School: A Case Study in External Influence on Internal Group Development," Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 9 (1973), pp. 287-288.

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14. The name of the school was changed for research purposes.

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16. Evelyn Drews, "Fernwood" in Radical School Reform, ed. Raymond Gross (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 265.

17. See "in trying to radically free education, we are playing with the mechanism of society which conditions our relations with one another, especially those associated with sex roles." New Schools Exchange Newsletter, July 19, 1971, p. 3.

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26. Researchers have used participant observation since the early twenties to analyze small group behavior. Its validity and usefulness as a research technique has been posited by many. See for example, Howard Becker, Sociological Work: Method and Substance (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970); Severyn Bruyn, "The Methodology of Participant Observation," Human Organization, 22 (1963), 224-235; Blanche Geer, "First Days in the Field," in Sociologists at Work ed. Paul Hammond (New York: Basic Book Inc., 1965), pp. 322-344.

27. Neil Vidmar and Richard Hackman, "Interlaboratory Generalizability of Small Group Research: An Exploratory Study," Journal of Social Psychology, 83 (1971), p. 129.

28. The list consisted of individual autonomy, noncompetitiveness, neutralization of authority, abolition of sex roles, interpersonal sensitivity, positive affirmation of individual differences, interpersonal congruence, nonmanipulative interaction, student-guided learning and cultural revolution. For an explanation of these free school attributes, see footnotes 13 and 15.

29. New School News (Chicago: American Friends Service Committee, January, 1973) was used to locate free schools in Illinois.

30. For a critical examination of role pretense see Robert Gold, "Roles in Sociological Field Observations," Social Forces, 36 (1958), 217-223.

31. The difficulty in gaining entree into alternative institutions and particularly free schools is discussed in this researcher's earlier study. See "The Free School: A Case Study in External Influence on Internal Group Development," Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 9 (1973), p. 286.

32. Muzafer Sherif details the affect of the researcher on patterns of interaction and argues for role-pretense. See Reference Groups (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) p. 7.

33. Muzafer Sherif also argues that "individuals are not confined

to the bounds of their group membership, nor are their groups insulated from outside influences." According to Sherif, the larger society has significant impact on group behavior. See Reference Groups (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) p. 165. Also see "Sociocultural Influences in Small Group Research," Sociology and Social Research 39 (1954), 50-64.